

Questioning god: bengal tiger at the baghdad zoo



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Rajiv Joseph's characters in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* wander through the war-torn Iraqi landscape looking for answers and finding none. The characters span a wide range of humanity: from young, ignorant American soldiers to a former gardener now employed as an interpreter for the occupying army to the ghost of Saddam Hussein's son, Uday. The title character is Tiger, but there is nothing feline about him. He walks upright, wears clothes, and pontificates philosophically. As characters die in this allegorical tale, their ghosts remain and continue to interact. Joseph draws from current events and relies heavily on literary allusion to ask the existential question: Where is God? Joseph's impetus for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was the real-life shooting of Mamdouh, a Bengal tiger in an Iraqi zoo. At an alcohol-laden party, an intoxicated American soldier attempted to share his food with Mamdouh, who – being a tiger – mauled the soldier's arm. The soldier's companion shot Mamdouh in retaliation. The United States presented the zoo with two rare Bengal tigers and \$23,000 compensation, but zookeepers still mourned the loss of an animal they loved, an animal born and raised at the zoo. Joseph's Tiger was not reared in the zoo, but was captured in the jungles of Bengal. "I won't lie. When I get hungry, I get stupid," Tiger explains. "I just followed the scent, took a bite, and then fhwipp!" (150). After Tiger is shot, he remains in the play as a ghost. Alarmed by life after death, Tiger roams from scene to scene wondering why his soul is not ascending to another world. He theorizes that his tiger nature caused him to sin in the jungles of Bengal, but zoo life should serve as penance. "You'd think the twelve years in a zoo, caged, never hunting, never killing, never breaking God's ridiculous law ... you'd think I would have atoned for my tigerness" Tiger says (152). Tiger considers

himself an unabashed atheist, but death and his ensuing ghostly existence, plants questions. “ What if my very nature is in direct conflict with the moral code of the universe?” Tiger muses. “ That would make me a fairly damned individual” (187). Tiger beseeches God to guide him in making things right, but God eludes the tiger. Joseph’s other impetus for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* seems to be William Blake’s poem, “ *The Tyger*.” The play parallels the poem in many respects. In the play, Tiger questions, “ What kind of twisted bastard creates a predator and then punishes him for preying?”(214). Blake’s poem asks “ Tyger, tyger, burning bright/ In the forests of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Blake, 838). Both works question how God could make such a killing machine. “ *The Tyger*” asks whether the predator is a creation of the “ distant deeps or skies,” a creation of Hell or Heaven. A little girl in the topiary garden in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* could be equated to Blake’s lamb. “ *The Tyger*” asks, “ Did He who made the lamb make thee?” Joseph’s Tiger relates a story about the ghost of a small, innocent girl in the topiary garden. Tiger tells her that he feels guilty for eating two children in the jungle, but the girl does not understand because she is without sin. “ She doesn’t have any guilt,” Tiger says. “ And I’m like, of course you don’t. What did you ever do?” (197). Joseph answers Blake’s query of the lamb’s creator by juxtaposing the child with the other, less-than-innocent characters in his play to convey that all of the characters are God’s creations. In addition to Blake, Joseph draws influence from Samuel Beckett’s dark humor and nihilistic outlook on human nature for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. In Beckett’s “ *Act Without Words*,” God is an unseen character toying with the protagonist. God dangles life’s necessities in front of a man marooned in the

<https://assignbuster.com/questioning-god-bengal-tiger-at-the-baghdad-zoo/>

desert just to yank them out of reach. In Joseph's play, Kev asks, " So what happens now, God? What happens now that I'm intelligent and aware and sensitive to the universe" Tiger replies, " God leans down just close enough and whispers into your ear: Go fuck yourself. And then he's gone" (222). As in " Act Without Words," God is an ever-present, yet elusive force in Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo. " This play is like a well-armed Godot," says Robin Williams, who portrays Tiger in the Broadway production (Simon). Joseph employs numerous Biblical references. While he translates the Arabic lines in the script, an author's note specifies not to translate or subtitle them for the audience. " Hey you speak English?" an American soldier asks an Iraqi couple. When the couple fails to understand, the soldier yells louder (165). The language difficulties in the play are reminiscent of the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel. When the people in Genesis tried to build a tower to Heaven, as a punishment, " the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth" (King James Version, Genesis 11: 9). In another Biblical allusion, Tiger compares the topiary garden to the Garden of Eden. He tells the little girl's ghost that God likes gardens and " He tempts us in them, he builds them up and tears them apart. It's like his fucking hobby" (197). Hands are a recurring theme in Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo, and many of those references have Biblical foundations. " And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands" says Mark 4: 19 (King James Version). Tom loses his hand to Tiger's teeth, Kev cuts off his own hand in as atonement for killing Tiger, and in Tiger's search for absolution, he also considers cutting away a part of himself. " I'll cut away all the pieces of me that offend the cosmos," he says. " I'll escape my cruel nature" (215). An Islamic directive dictates that people

<https://assignbuster.com/questioning-god-bengal-tiger-at-the-baghdad-zoo/>

use only their right hand for eating and for greeting each other. The left hand, considered dirty, is reserved for bathroom functions (Amjad). Perhaps Joseph employs the motif of hands as commentary on the duality of human nature. Rajiv Joseph combines current events with literary allusion to create a play that defies convention. Although he draws heavily from other works for *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, Rajiv Joseph injects his own darkly twisted surrealism. In the closing lines of the play, Tiger speaks in admonishing tones about God, saying, “ We should hunt You down lock You up just like every other wild thing in the world” (241). God does not answer. Where is God? Joseph does not allow his characters to encounter Him.

Works Cited
Amjad, Moiz. “ Eating with Left Hand.” *Understanding Islam*. 29 August, 1998. Web. 2 May, 2011. <http://www.understanding-islam.com/q-and-a/customs-and-symbols/eating-with-left-hand-5308>.
Blake, William. “ The Tyger” *The Norton Introduction to Literature, Third Edition*. Ed. Carl Bain, Jerome Beaty, J. Paul Hunter. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981. Print.
Holy Bible: King James Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
Joseph, Rajiv. *Gruesome Playground Injuries; Animals Out of Paper; Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo: Three Plays*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010. Print.
“ Mamdouh: The Baghdad Tiger on Broadway.” *Pakistan Daily Times*. 8 April, 2011. Web. 2 May, 2011 at <http://dailytimespakistan.com/mamdouh-the-baghdad-tiger-on-broadway/>.
Simon, Lizzie. “ Comedian earns His Stripes.” *The Wall Street Journal, Digital Network*. 2 April, 2011. Web. 2 May, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703806304576236880727781122.html>.